

Message Text

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C O R R E C T E D C O P Y - MRN 5291 VICE 5228

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SUBJECT: GOP RESUMPTION OF RELATIONS WITH CUBA

REF: PANAMA 5228

SUMMARY; THE GOP'S PUBLIC TREATMENT OF THE RESUMPTION OF RELATIONS WITH CUBA HAS BEEN DECIDEDLY CAUTIOUS AND CLEARLY CAREFULLY CONTROLLED. THE GOVERNMENT HAS LET STAND UNEMBELLISHED ITS ORIGINAL PUBLIC EXPLANATIONS AND ITS CONTROLLED MEDIA HAS GENERALLY ESCHEWED SENSATIONALISM AND AVOIDED ACCORDING THE DECISION IDEOLOGICAL OR ANTI-AMERICAN COLORATION. THIS RESTRAINED APPROACH, TOGETHER WITH THE PROMINENT MEDIA COVERAGE GIVEN TO FOREIGN NEWS REPORTS OF A GROWING HEMISPHERIC CONSENSUS TO NORMALIZE RELATIONS WITH CUBA, APPEARS TO BE PART OF THE GOP'S PRESENT STRATEGY FOR MINIMIZING THE POTENTIAL NEGATIVE IMPACT OF ITS ACTION ON DOMESTIC CONSERVATIVE OPINION. END SUMMARY

1. PANAMA'S DECISION TO RESUME DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS WITH CUBA WAS TAKEN IN THE BELIEF THAT THE GAINS FOR TORRIJOS
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AND THE GOP WOULD OVERSHADOW THE POSSIBLE LOSSES (REFTEL).

ONCE HAVING REACHED THAT CONCLUSION, A PRINCIPAL CONCERN MUST HAVE BEEN HOW BEST TO MINIMIZE THE POTENTIAL DAMAGE TO THE GOVERNMENT'S IMPROVED RELATIONS WITH ITS DOMESTIC CONSERVATIVE OPPOSITION. JUDGING FROM THE MANNER IN WHICH THE GOP AND ITS CONTROLLED MEDIA HAVE HANDLED THE MATTER, THE IMMEDIATE SOLUTION SEEMS TO HAVE BEEN TO SOFT-SELL THE DECISION AS NON-PROVOCATIVE, APPROPRIATE TO PANAMA'S INTERESTS, AND CLEARLY IN STEP WITH A SNOWBALLING HEMISPHERIC TREND IN THE SAME DIRECTION.

2. RATHER THAN AGGRESSIVELY BALLYHOO AND THE RESUMPTION OF RELATIONS WITH CUBA--AS IT DID ITS "VICTORIES" IN THE MARCH 1973 UNSC MEETING AND THE RECENT BANANA DISPUTE--- GOP HAS MAINTAINED A PUBLIC SILENCE FOLLOWING ITS INITIAL ANNOUNCEMENT AND OFFICIAL COMMUNIQUE. MOREOVER, WHILE INDIVIDUAL COLUMNISTS HAVE COMMENTED ENTHUSIASTICALLY (SEE USIS MEDIA REACTION REPORTS), THERE HAVE BEEN FEW FORMAL EDITORIALS AND THESE HAVE HEWED CLOSELY TO THE GOP'S OFFICIAL POSITION. TO FILL THE VOID THIS LACK OF FOLLOW-UP COMMENTARY MIGHT HAVE OCCASIONED, THE PRESS HAS GIVEN PROMINENT COVERAGE TO FOREIGN WIRE SERVICE REPRINTS OF THE VENEZUELAN COSTA RICAN/COLOMBIAN INITIATIVE IN THE OAS AND, MOST ESPECIALLY, TO ABUNDANT U.S. PRESS SPECULATION ON THE NEW U.S. ADMINISTRATION'S WILLINGNESS TO TAKE FRESH LOOK AT THE CUBAN QUESTION. THE IMPACT OF THIS STEADY DIET OF FOREIGN REPORTING IS TO LEAVE THE CLEAR IMPRESSION THAT THE MAJORITY OF THE OAS, PERHAPS EVEN THE U.S., IS NOT FAR BEHIND THE GOP.

3. THE LOCAL MEDIA, HOWEVER, HAS DEVOTED CONSIDERABLE ATTENTION TO THE IMPRESSIONS OF PANAMANIAN NEWSMEN WHO ACCOMPANIED THE OFFICIAL GOP DELEGATION TO HAVANA AUGUST 21-25. THE COMMON FOCUS HAS BEEN ON THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL SITUATION IN CUBA TODAY, WITH BOTH THE POSTITIVE ADVANCES AND NEGATIVE IMPACT OF CASTRO'S REGIME RECEIVING ATTENTION. GEOGRAPHIC AND CULTURAL TIES BETWEEN CUBA AND PANAMA ARE STRESSED RATHER THAN IDEOLOGICAL DIFFERENCES, AND IT IS CASTRO THE MAN---GENERALLY VIEWED AS AN INTELLIGENT AND DYNAMIC LEADER CONCERNED WITH THE WELFARE OF HIS PEOPLE-- RATHER THAN CASTRO THE REVOLUTIONARY THAT APPEARED TO LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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INTEREST THE PANAMANIAN. LA ESTRELLA DE PANAMA'S DIRECTOR, JUAN CARLOS DUQUE, DISCUSSED ADVANCES MADE UNDER CASTRO IN HEALTH, EDUCATION, HOUSING CONSTRUCTION, AND SPORTS AS WELL AS THE SCARCITY OF MANY CONSUMER GOODS, THE RATIONING OF MANY FOODS AND DESIARABLE GOODS, AND THE BLACK MARKET THIS HAS CREATED. DUQUE NOTED THAT CASTRO'S REVOLUTION HAS NO DOUBT HELPED THE COMMON MAN ATTAIN A BETTER STANDARD OF LIVING, BUT ADDED THAT CUBA'S SYSTEM "CAN NEVER SURPASS THOSE

BASED ON FREEDOM OF ACTION, FREEDOM OF WILL, SUPPLY AND DEMAND, AND ESPECIALLY PERSONAL FREEDOM OF THOUGHT AND FREEDOM OF THE PRESS." DUQUE ALSO SAW TWO SIDES TO THE ECONOMIST BLOCKADE OF CUBA. ON ONE HAND IT HAS HAD DETRIMENTAL EFFECTS ON CUBA'S ECONOMY, BUT IT HAS ALSO CLOSED CUBAN SOCIETY TO FOREIGN IDEOLOGIES. WITH THE REESTABLISHMENT OF RELATIONS WITH "THE AMERICAS," HE SAYS, THE REAL TEST OF CASTRO'S REGIME WILL BEGIN. MATUTINO'S DEPUTY DIRECTOR ELUCIDES FUENTES ARROYO, (PAINTED A BRIGHTER PICTURE OF LIFE UNDER CASTRO. HE DISCUSSED THE PRIVILEGES AND ECONOMIC ADVANTAGES THAT WERE FORMERLY AVAILABLE ONLY TO WEALTHY CUBANS BUT ARE NOW ATTAINABLE BY THE "COMMON MAN." REFERRING TO THE "YELLOW PRESS" THAT HAS ACCUSED CUBA OF BEING A TYRANNY IN WHICH NO ONE DARES SPEAK AGAINST THE "STATE", FUENTES MAINTAINED THAT HIS DISCUSSIONS WITH CUBANS PROVED THIS NOT TO BE THE CASE. CRITICA'S YOUNG DIRECTOR RUBEN MURGAS CONCENTRATED ON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENTS THAT CUBA HAS REALIZED UNDER CASTRO. MURGAS DESCRIBED CASTRO AS "INSPIRING CONFIDENCE FROM THE FIRST MOMENT," AND AS HAVING IMPRESSED HIM WITH HIS "PROFOUND KNOWLEDGE OF ECONOMIC MATTERS."

4. COMMENT: HAVING APPARENTLY CONCLUDED THAT TO REALIZE THE DOMESTIC POLITICAL ADVANTAGES RESUMPTION OF RELATIONS OFFERED (SEE REFTTEL) IT NEEDED TO DO LITTLE MORE THAN TAKE THE PLUNGE, THE GOP HAS SUBSEQUENTLY TRIED TO MINIMIZE THE POSSIBLE NEGATIVE IMPACT ON CONSERVATIVE OPINION. TORRIJOS HAS ENGINEERED A RAPPROACHEMENT WITH THE PRIVATE SECTOR SINCE THE CONTROVERSY OVER THE OCTOBER 1973 HOUSING LAWS--MOST RECENTLY EVIDENT IN THE SUPPORT HE HAS RECEIVED ON THE BANANA TAX ISSUE--AND HE CLEARLY DID NOT WANT TO NEEDLESSLY REACTIVATE CONSERVATIVE OPPOSITION OVER THE CUBAN QUESTION. WHILE THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY WAS UNDOUBTEDLY ANXIOUS TO BENEFIT FROM RENEWED COMMERCIAL LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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RELATIONS WITH CUBA,IT HAS ALWAYS BEEN SENSITIVE TO INDICATIONS OF LEFTIST INFLUENCES ON TORRIJOS. THE GOP'S LACK OF AGGRESSIVE POSTURING,THE MEDIA'S NON-IDEOLOGICAL TREATMENT OF THE REESTABLISHMENT OF RELATIONS, AND THE HEAVY EMPHASIS GIVEN FOREIGN MEDIA COMMENTARY ON THE GROWING HEMISPHERIC CONSENSUS FOR NORMALIZING CUBAN RELATIONS IS CLEARLY AIMED AT ASSUAGING THOSE FEARS.

JORDEN

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